

Quaker Universalist Group



QUAKER
UNDERSTANDINGS OF
TRUTH

Papers from the Quaker Universalist Group

Annual Conference, 2018

QUG Pamphlet No. 40

£4.00

TRUTH – AN INTRODUCTION

Tony Philpott

Why are we having this conference? Does truth matter? With such profound questions we have to start thinking somewhere and I shall start with what I see as our basic values: living a good life, empathy for others, compassion, reducing suffering, increasing happiness, fulfilling the Quaker testimonies. I believe that all of these values are enhanced by trying to attain the truth, and indeed trying to attain the truth is one of these values and one of the Quaker testimonies.

We need the truth, the facts, so that we can understand others and empathise; we need to do the science to reduce suffering, say through medicine and psychology; we need to understand the views of others to carry out our peace-building; we need the facts to reduce inequality (look at the equal pay row with regard to gender going on at the present!). For all of these reasons, and more, we need to find out the truth.

So truth is very important, but what is it? If we use a dictionary, truth is what is the case, reality, how things are, the facts. How does a person get to the truth? It is a simple question of experience for some things: for example, if I walk into a table I know it is there, it is a fact for me. But most truth is much more difficult than this. There is a filter, or a fog, between the truth and the person and we will be spending the whole conference trying to see through this filter, or disperse this fog. Let us look at four aspects of our existence that get between us and the truth.

Culture

We all grow up in a particular culture (or society or community), which will have a distinct view of what is the truth. This is termed by sociologists the social construction of reality.

The culture I grew up in is described in my book [1]. I was born in the mid-1940s and I grew up in a middle class community in North London. I was sent to Sunday School and went regularly to the local evangelical Anglican church, where there was a very clear view of the truth: Christianity was the one true religion and the Bible was the authoritative word of God (as interpreted by the clergy at my church).

When we are young we tend to take on the beliefs and views of the culture in which we grow up: this is called socialisation.

If we look more widely at the world as a whole the culture into which we grow could be one of many in terms of its beliefs about the truth: it could be one which believes in the personal God of Christianity; or one which is humanist and does not believe in God at all; or one which believes in Allah and the five pillars of Islam; or one which believes in Buddhism and the four noble truths; or one which is Quaker and believes in our testimonies, the value of silence and an emphasis on a process rather than a creed. The implications of this for religious belief will be explored elsewhere in this conference, but I do refer you to John Hick, one of the founders of the Quaker Universalist Group, for example his Pamphlet No 3, *Christ in a Universe of Faiths*, available online [2].

Having been socialised into a particular view of the truth, what happens when we become an adult? (And indeed what happens to some children who reject the culture in which they grow up?) There are a number of possibilities.

- You can carry on in your culture: for example, once a Quaker, always a Quaker.
- You can change to something else: you could be brought up as a Christian, but change to a Buddhist. In my case I have changed from evangelical Christian to universalist Quaker (and I chose this as the subtitle of my book).
- You can try to find commonalities between all the world views, as in Alan York's recent pamphlet [3] or in books, like Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* [4].

What you cannot do is go outside all the world views and look at them from some superior or neutral position. This would appear to be impossible, for we are always culturally bound [5].

Let us move now to the individual and take a more psychological approach.

Heuristics or biases

How do I as an individual approach truth?

Psychologists over the last 20 years or so have been looking at how we decide on the truth or why we believe things and I was first introduced to this in the book *The Believing Brain* by Michael Shermer. He introduced me to the notion of cognitive heuristics or biases. "Once we form beliefs and make commitments to them, we maintain and reinforce them through a number of powerful cognitive heuristics that guarantee that they are correct. A heuristic is a mental method of solving a

problem through intuition, trial and error... These heuristics are sometimes called rules of thumb although they are better known as cognitive biases because they almost always distort percepts to fit preconceived concepts. Beliefs configure perceptions” [6]. Shermer goes on to list 38 cognitive biases! Here are three examples.

Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek and find confirmatory evidence in support of already existing beliefs and ignore or reinterpret disconfirming evidence. It is emotionally driven and particularly strong in political beliefs.

I am not going to say much about the influence of our emotions on how we seek the truth and why we believe certain things, suffice it to say that we are not rational logical creatures very much, but are driven by emotion. Psychologists talk of two ways of thinking: (a) fast, intuitive, emotional, lazy, automatic, with no sense of control; (b) slow, rational, effortful, with an awareness of what one is doing. The former often predominates, even in decisions like who you vote for. Have a look at *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman [7].

When we come to the media, of course, you will tend to read or listen to what fits in with your beliefs. I often cringe when I look at the headlines of the newspapers I don't read, though maybe it is not the newspaper influencing beliefs as much as the believer reading the newspaper which says what she wants it to say.

Sunk cost bias is the tendency to believe something because of the sunk cost in that belief. It applies to investments, war, relationships, and many other commitments: we hang on far too long when we should get out. For example, maybe we don't believe in manmade climate change because our whole

way of life into which we have sunk so much depends on a high carbon output?

Anchoring bias is the tendency to rely too heavily on one piece of information when making decisions. For instance, we meet someone who takes a particular remedy for pain and it works for him, so we try it. If we looked up the scientific evidence, however, there would be no valid evidence that the remedy worked.

There are 35 more biases described in Shermer's book. There is no clear line from us to the truth for we are full of biases which affect everything we believe and every decision we make.

Truth itself is problematic

There are many different types of truth and some are more problematic than others.

I want to refer to another book now: *Truth – How the Many Sides to Every Story Shape Our Reality* by Hector Macdonald [8]. This is a very readable book. The author is a practical businessman who advises businesses and government agencies how to get over their messages to their target audiences successfully: he is a media expert. He is not a philosopher and only mentions philosophy briefly. He talks about many types of truth.

Complex truth. Macdonald refers to an article in *Publishers Weekly* in 2014 entitled 'Is Amazon Really the Devil?' He then spends three pages talking of the pros and cons of the company and concludes that the truth is so complex that for an individual "One or two key truths will predominate. What is Amazon? You choose" [9].

History. Historians know how difficult it is to get to the truth in history. Read this description of an historical event: “Important technologies were developed, especially in transport, cutlery and personal hygiene. Democracy flourished, with many people joining unions and gaining the vote. Social equality increased. Diets for many poor people improved, making them fitter and stronger. Infant mortality dropped and life expectancy rose. Drunkenness decreased. More jobs were available, especially for women, opening the way for greater gender equality” [10]. It sounds like a really positive event but the truth has been obscured and slanted. It was, of course, the First World War!

Numbers. As Mark Twain popularised, there are “lies, damned lies and statistics” [11]. Having said that, I have a lot of time for proper statistics, but we have to be careful when we look at some statistics in a newspaper, or listen to a politician quoting some numbers to back up an argument. If you are interested in mathematics, a good recent book on this topic is *How Not to Be Wrong – The Hidden Maths of Everyday Life* by Jordan Ellenberg [12].

Stories. Macdonald talks about stories and how these guide us to the truth as much as non-fiction (See also Alan York’s talk and pamphlet).

Morality, Desirability, Taste, Aesthetics. These are all areas where there is no clear truth. Here is a topical question: is it morally right for Facebook to allow your data to be used by a private business to influence elections?

Finally, let us look at **religious truth**. Macdonald, like many authors, classes religious truth with morality and aesthetics. But I want to refer here to another more philosophical

book by Simon Blackburn [13]. Blackburn introduces his chapter on religion and truth as follows: “Like aesthetics and ethics, religion is an area whose credentials, if they are presented in terms of truth and fact, seem decidedly doubtful. As with aesthetics, we have, obviously enough, the great diversity of personal responses, as *different religions have appealed or continue to appeal to different people in different social and cultural circumstances. They can’t all be true.* And even under the broad umbrellas of religions such as Christianity or Islam sects proliferate and are all too apt to sow discord or hatred. One man’s faith is another man’s lunacy, or worse, and peaceful co-existence is a fragile commodity, little more than a short truce in the battles for hearts and minds: battles, unfortunately, in which the adherents of one sect rather too often set about murdering those of another” [14]. (My italics).

On a more positive note I have found a wonderful quote about John Hick, written by Darryl J Murphy, a Canadian philosopher and writer. “Contemporary theorist John Hick (1922-2012) was a strong advocate of religious pluralism. He argued that all truth claims concerning God relate not to the god itself but to one’s subjective experience of God. According to Hick, *the world is religiously ambiguous; it can be experienced either religiously or nonreligiously and according to any number of culturally conditioned religious traditions.* The world offers no positive support for any one religion. For this reason, all religions should be tolerated if not embraced” [15]. (My italics).

The Media

Another book I have been reading recently is *Fire and Fury* by Michael Wolff [16]. He describes how the media thought they could outwit Donald Trump. The media “believed it could diminish him and wound him and rob him of all credibility by relentlessly pointing out how literally wrong he was. The media ... could not fathom how being factually wrong was not an absolute ending in itself. How could this not utterly shame him? How could his staff defend him? The facts were the facts! Defying them, or ignoring them, or subverting them, made you a liar – intending to deceive, bearing false witness”. Then Wolff goes on to describe how Kellyanne Conway (Counsellor to the president) announced to the world in relation to the size of the crowd at Trump’s inauguration there were “alternative facts”. “It sounded like the new administration was claiming the right to recast reality” [17].

Of course, that’s the good side of the media. But the media – and everyone else, including us – can have a bad side.

Returning to the book by Hector Macdonald, he classifies people into three types:

Advocates: selecting competing truths that create a reasonably accurate impression of reality in order to achieve a constructive goal.

Misinformers: innocently propagating competing truths that unintentionally distort reality.

Misleaders: deliberately deploying competing truths to create an impression of reality that they know is not true” [18].

I will call the advocates the good guys, the misinformers the naïve guys and the misleaders the bad guys. Which one applies to us? Which one applies to me? And are we aware

which one applies when we are reading a newspaper, or watching the news on TV or using social media?

Conclusion

Where does that leave us? How do we see through all these filters or get through all this fog?

There are no short cuts, unless we just say ‘I will accept this authority’ or ‘I will take this cultural view because I was brought up in it’. Many people do this, wittingly or unwittingly, and I do not wish to judge them – but this is not for me.

I will never forget Rex Ambler’s talk last year to our QUG conference, written up in *Mind the Oneness – the Mystic Way of the Quakers* [19]. As Rex quoted that phrase from George Fox “This I knew experimentally” I realised afresh that this was what I had been doing in my life since the age of 20 (and before in a different sort of way): it was having an open mind, reading books without being told what to read, and testing everything against my reason and my experience. Does it make sense (the truth theory of coherence) and does it tie in with my experience (the truth theory of correspondence)? Maybe this is the Quaker Way?

One of the most interesting things I read in Simon Blackburn’s book is that what is important in terms of truth is not the nature of truth but whether or not you a truth seeking person. Are you open to new light? Are you honest with yourself and others? Do you have integrity? This of course is the Quaker testimony.

The emphasis should be on the process of truth seeking rather than the end product. If people are seeking the truth then

maybe all those values that we talked about at the beginning can be fulfilled.

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THOUGHTS ON SPIRITUAL AND SCIENTIFIC TRUTH

Alan York

Spiritual truth is commonly presented as being undeniable, as self-evident and in no need of support beyond the conviction itself, “I *know* that my Redeemer liveth”, whereas scientific truth is considered to be based firmly on evidence. So these two are often seen as opposites and statements of spiritual truth and scientific truth often, maybe usually, seen as contradictory to each other. For example, it was thought to be a spiritual/religious truth that the world was made by God as a habitation for mankind, and this appears to contradict the scientific truth that humans live for a short time, on the surface of an only average inner planet, orbiting round an undistinguished star, circling in an outer arm of a galaxy which is itself just one of millions. I aim to show in this short talk that the scientific and the spiritual are more similar than is commonly thought.

Scientific truth claims are evidence based. They rely on processes of objective observation and experiment. Hypotheses based on observation and experiment are confirmed or refuted by further observation and experiment. So the truth of a scientific statement is always *provisional*, in that it is potentially subject to change as the result of further observations and experiments. If these support the statement then the statement is, to that extent, confirmed: if they contradict the statement then the statement must be at least revised and, possibly, abandoned.

A well-known example of this is Newton's account of gravity and his laws of motion, which were later found to be only approximately true and were replaced by the more accurate account given by Einstein's General Theory of Relativity.

When we consider the idea of spiritual truth, we enter, it is sometimes said, a different sphere. In the world's religious literature mystics from diverse religions or none typically speak of spiritual experience in terms of a sense of transcendence, of peace, of love, of universal benevolence, of unity, where all time and space unite, and where the sense of self dissolves in universal awareness and universal love. This is sometimes spoken of as unity or communion with God, or Buddhahood, enlightenment - a realisation of the real nature of existence. But, most importantly, it is, I think, always spoken of as an *experience*. As George Fox said, "This I knew experimentally", i.e. through experience. And this sort of experience is not totally unknown amongst the rest of us.

So I would argue that spiritual insight, spiritual truth, relies on *experience*. As does scientific truth. For science relies, ultimately, on observation. It may be complex, sophisticated and meticulous observation, and involve accurate and sustained measurement, but it is observation nevertheless - i.e. experience.

Science relies on our apprehension of the external physical world through our five senses. Philosophers use the term *qualia* for the fundamental sensory experiences we have, eg of colour, taste, smell etc. These *qualia* are then augmented and organised in our minds by the conceptual framework we impose on them. For example, my taste of coffee is influenced by my conceptions of coffee, what I know and believe about it and my attitude towards it. It is important to note that the *qualia*,

these raw sense experiences, are essentially private experiences - I cannot know or experience the taste *you* experience from coffee, and I cannot precisely communicate my own experience to you. My qualia are inaccessible to objective science because they are subjective and private to me – as yours are private to you.

But these private experiences are the basic building blocks of our experience of the world and we attempt to objectify them by using a common language which gives names to objects and properties of objects we can see and experience in common. For example, we can agree on instances of “red” and the application of the word “red”, whilst being quite unaware of each other’s private sense experience of redness.

I would argue that the spiritual experiences spoken of by the mystics are private and fundamentally incommunicable in the same way that sensory experiences are – and equally valid as experiences. I would argue that the sense of, for example, unity of universal time and space, overwhelming love, etc. are as valid as fundamental experiences as the sense of ‘red’ or the smell of coffee, etc.

I would like to suggest that we adopt the term *spiritual qualia* for these fundamental spiritual experiences, which are the basis of spiritual insight and the notion of spiritual truth in a similar way to which sensory qualia are the basis for scientific insights and scientific truth.

Spiritual qualia are ineffable. It seems as impossible to communicate the sense of existential peace and joy to someone who has not had that experience as it is to communicate the nature of the colour red to someone blind from birth. In everyday life we point to our common experiences of the world and the

objects we observe about us and we have developed a language to use to communicate with one another about them, eg sticks, stones, animals, people, etc. In our spiritual world, to what do we point? We do not see angels, the gates of heaven, or the depths of hell, etc. in the objective world - it seems there are just our private qualia.

But we feel the need to communicate our private spiritual experiences to each other; we feel the need to communicate the ineffable. So what we have done is to invent a different type of language. We tell stories and invent legends and myths. We speak of the ‘fall of man’, ‘the forgiveness of God’, ‘the Peace of God which passeth all understanding’. We speak in parable and allegory: “In my father’s house there are many mansions”. “God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son...” “The Truth was a mirror in the hands of Allah. It fell and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth”. It can be argued that the language we commonly use when speaking of the spiritual is allegorical, perhaps entirely so.

Perhaps, then, spiritual or religious language can only be allegorical. If understood it tells us fundamental truths about our existence, for example that spiritual peace (“the peace of God that passeth all understanding”) is always and universally available. Spiritual language tells us, through allegory, the truth about the nature of existence whereas scientific language tells us particular and objective truths about all the things that exist in the physical world. It is perhaps when the spirituality of individuals becomes the group religion of a whole community that the allegories used to express ineffable truths become ‘objectified’ as creeds.

I suggested at the start of this talk that scientific truth is always provisional – so how provisional is spiritual truth? There may be an ineffable truth within the allegory which is non-provisional but I would suggest that the allegory itself is provisional in that its literal accuracy can be challenged. For example, when people speak of the Son of God coming to earth as a human being to save sinners they tell a powerful tale which resonates within the human psyche of many. For the story tells us that God has revealed himself through a man and his teachings, that God is a personal God who loves us, that God has great power which we can accept or not into our lives. It tells us that if we return God's love we are ultimately forgiven and achieve salvation - loneliness, despair and death have been defeated. But these spiritual experiences, the sense of belonging, of love and peace, of wonder and power, of acceptance and of eternity, etc. can come to men and women of other religions, through other allegorical stories.

So I would like to suggest that although religious language and religious truth when expressed in allegorical terms may be considered provisional and questionable, there may be a spiritual truth contained within that is ineffable, universal and non-provisional. But I leave this for you to consider.

Note on the use of the terms ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion:

I have noticed that in discussions about religion and spirituality religion is usually spoken of as a corporate enterprise, a characteristic of a group of human beings, whereas spirituality is spoken of more as a characteristic of individuals. I have followed this usage in this talk.

UNIVERSALISM: A TRUTH SUPPRESSED WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION.

Hugh Rock

Christian Universalism and the Quaker variant

Friends, the subject that I have been asked to address is ‘Truth in Religion’. That is too overwhelmingly general a subject, so I am narrowing it down to focus on Universalism, and specifically how this truth has been suppressed within the Christian tradition.

Universal salvation is a natural, and beautiful, interpretation of the Christian message of God’s love for the world and his wish to redeem humanity. It is as natural and true as any other interpretation of the gospels could be. But power and ecclesiastical politics determine which of the many truths about the Christian message predominate and Universalism is one that, just like the mystical tradition, has been persecuted out of the officially endorsed mainstream.

The theme of this conference takes up not just truth but specifically Quaker understandings of truth. Universalism is particularly relevant to Quaker Faith. Friends testify to a distinctive strand of Universalism. It would be fair to ask why Quakers have not been openly known as Universalists and why the Quaker Universalist Group was inspired as late as 1977. Well, it is the substance and impetus of the thought that counts rather than the several names, such as ‘free grace’, that cloaked

it in its seventeenth century guise. I hope to indicate some of the Universalist leanings that can be discovered in Quaker Faith from its beginnings.

In his brief to me Tony Philpott suggested that we should tackle the question “With all the different religions claiming to be ‘the truth’ but contradicting each other, how can this make sense?” Christian Universalism has a decisive answer to that. Quaker Faith produces an equally decisive answer.

My plan is first to outline the intellectual foundations of Christian Universalism and the history of its suppression within the church. I will then illustrate its clear answer to this question of different and contradictory religious truths.

I will go on to present George Fox’s particular strand of Universalism, which is religion defined exclusively by good deeds. I will bring out the distinctive resolution that this produces for the question of contradictory truths.

Lastly, I will touch on the fact that the Quaker Universalist Group is founded on neither of these two universalising themes. It draws from a third source which is the mystical, or Greek/Platonist, tradition. So, to conclude, Friends have on offer three different truths about religion on which to draw for their Universalist inclinations.

The inspiration and subsequent fortunes of Christian Universalism

There are various possible definitions of Universalism, but they all belong within similar parameters. I define Universalism as ‘the belief that God’s love will work a comprehensive restoration of the creation to its original, unspoiled form’. This

should be understood in the context of Christianity as a religion characterised supremely by the story of fall and redemption: all people have been saved by the work of Christ, and at the end of time God's just plan will be revealed and all will be made good.

I detect Universalism, quite broadly, by what it is not. It is the stream of thought that stands in opposition to John Calvin's vision of irredeemably sinful humanity and eternal damnation, carried out by a vengeful God who despised his own creation.

This message, that every person has been granted the grace to be saved, springs from two New Testament passages. The opening paragraph of the Gospel of Saint John reads:

“In the beginning was the Word. What has come to being in Him was life, and the life *was the light of all people*”

Let's iterate the import of that. It does not say “the light of *some* people”. Nor does it say that the light was given only to those people who happen to read this verse.

Saint Paul states the universal fall/redemption scheme more specifically than John. His first letter to the Corinthians reads:

“For as *all* die in Adam, so *all* will be made alive in Christ”.

Those are the two founding texts of Christian Universalism.

These passages aside, there is an emotional wellspring that sustains Universalism. A God who is truly loving must have provided for the salvation of all people. He or she could not conceivably *have made discriminatory provision* for different people's salvation. God must have made provision for all people to receive the light of the Gospel, in their own capacities and cultures. So the Universalist position is that even though a person may never have encountered the scriptures, nor heard the

name of Jesus, they will have been given, by God, the light that is discoverable within themselves.

George Fox is an example of this. He writes that he experienced the light and *afterwards* discovered it confirmed in the scriptures.[1]

Fox provides a prime example of the Universalist attitude. He went on tour to visit the Native American inhabitants in order to *discover* the light that God had given them. That is in total contrast to the typical Christian missionary who went to tell natives about the superiority of Christianity.

There is a historical context to this contrast of missions. Fox's inspiration and following are set against the background of John Calvin's crushing exclusivism which saturated the Anglican Church of Fox's day [2] Calvin considered that, before the publication of the scriptures, all humanity had been consigned to hell. Since that publication only those privileged to know the scriptures stood a chance of being saved. All other contemporary cultures constituted death. Quite specifically for Calvin, and for Saint Augustine in whose tradition Calvin resides, Christ did not die for all men. He died only for a limited selection, pre-allocated by God.

This Universalist message, flowing out of the New Testament, was in free circulation during the early period of the Church in the circumstances of a developing Christianity. We

¹ John Nickalls, Ed., *The Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge University Press, 1952, p.33-34. All further quotations from Fox are taken from this edition.

² Quaker Faith can no more be understood outside the context of the Calvinism of the day, than Socialism might stand to be understood outside the context of capitalism. An account of the Quaker disagreement with Calvinism can be found in Hugh Rock, *Quakerism Understood in relation to Calvinism: The Theology of George Fox* Scottish Journal of Theology, Volume 70, Issue 3, August 2017.

have to cast our minds back to a time when local churches were working out their own ideas independently of orders from above.

The two Church Fathers Clement of Alexandria (AD150-215) and his successor Origen (AD185-254) considered that God's love continued its redemptive work in hell until it achieved a perfect restoration of the creation. Saint Jerome (AD342-420) speculated that the new covenant effected by Christ comprised even the eventual reconciliation of Satan.

It is a beautiful vision of God's irresistible, inexhaustible, all conquering love. Fox felt something of this. He tells of being struck by "God's unspeakable love for the world".

However, this natural and generous interpretation of the Christian message was soon suppressed by the centralising Church. This is because it manifests a terrible defect for bureaucratic interests: it is not supportive of the power of the Church. Nor does it support the authority of the priesthood. To put it bluntly, if God is doing all the redemptive work what is the point of the Church? The Church gains wealth and power by *mediating* salvation. It interprets, directs and controls salvation.

It's not surprising, then, to discover that Universalism was soon officially stamped out. Bruiser Saint Augustine led the way in routing the early Fathers. He succeeded in imposing as official policy "the eternal death of the damned" [3] and the limited atonement of Christ.

This machination in the church was then backed up with imperial authority. The emperor Justinian secured anathemas against Origen by a general council of the Church in 553. "If any

³ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, section 113.

one says.... that the punishment of impious men is only temporary and will have an end, and that a restoration will take place.... let him be anathema".[4]

From then on Universalism has retained the status of heresy. It has been a Christian viewpoint that dare not speak its name. It was revived in the Free Grace controversies of the early seventeenth century, of which Fox is part, and in John Murray's founding of the Universalist Church in America in 1774.

The Universalist resolution of contradictory religious truths

We opened this discussion by floating the perennially difficult question of the truth in religions that contradict each other. We are now in a position to identify the Universalist resolution of this conundrum.

The Universalist is not remotely bothered by the variety or apparent contradiction. He or she knows for certain that God has given the light to every person, regardless of these different forms. Perhaps, also, it's not our place to enquire into God's reasons for producing this apparently contradictory variety? We need only trust to God's love in the matter - for us, as for anyone else.

That is an astonishingly powerful religious proposition. It is both bold and humble. It is confidently, unshakeably Christian. But at the same time, it is an utterly self-effacing Christianity. It is, paradoxically, Christian based, but not

⁴ Justinian *Anathematisms against Origen*, in Joseph Ayer, *A Source Book for Church History*, New York: Scribner's, 1913, p.543.

Christian centred. I believe that something of that ideal has been held and expressed by the Society of Friends.

George Fox's universalising definition of Truth

George Fox, in his Journal, refers constantly to Truth, with a capital T. When we examine the usage of phrases such as "being in Truth" or "out of Truth" we discover that a distinctive proposition is in play: religion is defined exclusively by good deeds and not by any doctrines other than that doctrine.

This proposition can be approached via his mission statement. "I was to bring them off from all the world's religions which are vain that they might know the pure religion, and might visit the fatherless, the widows and the strangers.... and then there would not be so many beggars."

What constitutes "pure religion" then, for Fox, is kind action. It is to visit the fatherless, the widows and the strangers.

Fox does not use the word Truth in this passage but we find that he uses several synonyms for Truth. Throughout his work "pure religion", "The Truth", "the Light", "the Life," "The Spirit", "the Word", are all synonymous. They are all characterised by kind actions.

Everlasting Truth *is* "not to oppress the servants in their wages", it *is* "to do justly", it *is* to "turn from deceit and to turn to the Lord". Truth is peace and unity. Action not talk is the measure of religion. Fox enjoins "not in a light way to hold a talk of the Lord's words but practise them".

Practise, kindness, good actions are the constant theme of Fox's message about religion.

The counterpart to Fox's insistence on Deed, is a constant complaint about vain doctrines. He refers to "people tossed up and down with windy doctrines and thoughts and notions and things". Fox complains of those "who got the form of godliness but not the power". He complains of those who "could speak so much of their experiences of God, and yet turned from the Spirit and the Word". "As I thus travelled through the countries, professors took notice of me and sought to be acquainted with me, but I was afraid of them for I was sensible they did not possess what they professed"

I sum up Fox's preaching as the religion of Deed contrasted with religions of Doctrine.

Historical context

It is helpful to have some historical context for this persistent contrasting of deed and doctrine, possession and profession, that we find in Fox. Here we are back again to the baneful influence of Calvin.

The dominant religious text of interregnum England was John Calvin's sixteenth century bulldozing work *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. It is a 1300 page text, longer than the Bible itself, devoted to expounding 'sound doctrine'. The contents of *The Institutes* were absorbed through popular abridgments and annotated Bibles. Sound Doctrine, to Calvin, is absolutely essential to salvation. Corrupt doctrine leads to God's sentence of eternal death.

In Fox's day the demise of royal authority had effectively suspended the English Church and a need was felt to establish a new state church. Calvin's propositions were condensed into the

hugely influential *Westminster Confession of Faith*. This was presented to parliament in 1646 and was intended to settle doctrine for the new Presbyterian Church in England. The thirty-three articles that it contains are built on distinctive doctrinal statements. In the words of a Victorian commentator, in the edition that I use, in order to attain peace of mind in avoiding error "it is impossible to state those positions with too great definiteness and precision".

George Fox is having none of this test of religion. It is exclusively your kind actions that count as religion.

British Friends have consistently opposed the formulation of doctrinal statements as the basis of allegiance. During the one-hundred-year engagement with the World Council of Churches Friends have rigidly refused that faith could be embodied in any doctrinal formula.

The Universalising tendency of Deed versus Doctrine

How can we place this 'religion of Deed'? Just like the Universalist understanding, it cuts right across all belief systems and all cultures. It unites people of goodwill from everywhere into what can be called 'the invisible church'.

We should also note that this principle of Deed is a powerful unifying principle in diversity. There have been constant strains of worry amongst Quaker Friends that the Society may be falling apart with diversity because it cannot state any unifying doctrine. But Fox's Truth of Deed is a doctrine that ends all doctrines. For me this is the solid foundation of Quaker faith - all that counts is that, out of

multitudinous beliefs, we should distil collective action that manifests our love for each other and for the world.

That is George Fox's truth. It is a beautiful Truth. It is Quaker Truth. And it seems to me to be the fact of what the Society of Friends has always attempted to realise.

Conclusion

To sum up, Quaker Faith contains two principles that universalise religion. Quaker insistence on the light that is in every person springs directly out of the Universalist message of Saint John's Gospel. This is supplemented by George Fox's distinctive universalising principle that true religion is defined exclusively by good deeds.

I recognise, also, that the Quaker Universalist Group, as inspired by John Linton, takes its universalising principle not from the sin and salvation, apocalyptic branch of Christian Faith that Christian Universalism represents, but from the mystical, or Greek/Platonist, tradition of religion. A different universalising principle is embodied in this tradition, namely that all doctrinal propositions are put into suspense because they are subordinated to attempts to reach a higher truth.

To conclude, we have touched on three different resolutions to our opening question of how to reconcile contradictory truths contained in different religions. Friends possess a good choice of universalising principles to take their inclinations forward.

TRUTH IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE. WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT FAKE NEWS?

Stephen Cox

I would like to start with a quote from Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way - *in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.*”

(Italics mine)

Dickens was wise. Although the speed and degree of change we see today is unprecedented, we have been here before. Social, technological, and economic change is challenging our benign assumptions about the free and fair exchange of views, that truth will simply rise to the top of the discussion. But we have faced technological innovation in communication before.

Plato said democracy would never work, because the people were too poorly educated and too easily swayed by lies and rhetoric.

We've never had so much rich, accurate information we can check, so much informed commentary and so much access to the original research. We have never been so able to keep an eye on our rulers. Yet our politics is a mess.

I believe we are seeing whether the traditional idea of a liberal democracy, however imperfect, can endure. In twenty years' time our politics may look more like Putin's Russia or Erdogan's Turkey.

As Cambridge Analytica's Mark Turnbull said, not knowing he was being filmed: *"It's no good fighting an election campaign on the facts, because it is all about emotion."*

Can democracy survive in a post-truth era? Post-truth: *Beyond or superseding the importance of **truth**; pertaining to an era or situation when truth is no longer significant or relevant; ... uncaring of factual accuracy.*

What specific contribution can Quakers bring? Have we abandoned the idea that there is a testimony to truth which we must see in our own lives, but also seek to advance in public life? I believe like Senator John McCain that 'facts are stubborn things'.

Fake news is nothing new

Pharaoh Ramesses II, the Great, waged war on the Hittites. The Battle of Kadesh was a bloody stalemate; in fact, the war continued for fifteen years thereafter. Ramesses dealt with the

problem by simply declaring that he had won and raising celebratory texts in all the temples.

Rulers have lied since time immemorial. Forgery has been used to smear political opponents and raise prejudice against individuals and groups. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, forged by Tsarist secret police, are still used to stir up anti-Semitism and conspiracy theories today. In 1924 the Daily Mail smeared the Labour Party as Bolshevik through the Zinoviev letter forged by British intelligence.

Nor are disruptive communications technologies new. The printing press made producing newspapers possible, and the rapid dissemination of books and pamphlets cheaper and easier. It fuelled first the Reformation, which led to brutal religious wars, then the Enlightenment. It allowed the unschooled preacher George Fox to spread his inspirations across the English-speaking world, part of a turmoil in religious and political thought. Printing gave wings to rapid progress. It also helped the Civil War to be fought with a new form of war propaganda - the newspaper - and it helped whip up hysteria against religious and other minorities.

I saw a Quaker say - online! - *'Everyone agrees that the internet has been a disaster.'* Would we ban the printing press? Some cultures did and suffered irreparable social and economic harm.

The nature of media power today

Broadly we get our news from TV (69% of people), radio (33%), print newspapers (29%) and online (48%). Online includes the online arms of traditional media, a host of online specific news

sources and social media. These channels interlock and the majority of people use more than one method. [All data is OFCOM 2016. Internet use will have increased and print newspaper decreased, a little, but not enough to invalidate any argument.]

Yet the number of regular news sources used by an individual tends to be small (on average 3.8). In the survey conducted at this QUG conference most people read only one newspaper group. OFCOM found 40% of TV users only used one TV source, 58% of radio users only used one radio source and 38% of internet users only used one source.

Social media are extremely important. A third of people use social media – particularly Google, Facebook and Twitter - to find their news. I use Twitter a lot, but also like the description that you usually see “someone’s outrage on someone else’s hot take on the news, before you see the actual news”.

There is something to be said for the regulation of balance on broadcast, but this can lead to ‘fake balance’. Flat Earthers are not given equal time with Round Earthers, but in some areas of science and politics a narrative has been created contrary to established facts.

Limiting our sources is not just about good facts and falsehoods, it is also the choice of what is important, how debates are framed, and whether you get a full picture. The issue is not whether ‘benefit fraud is bad’ but, perhaps, why no emphasis is put on the vastly greater scale of unclaimed benefits poor people are owed or, indeed, most people’s complete misunderstanding of the benefits system.

We can use social media to reinforce our natural prejudices. The sheer volume, speed and loudness of 24/7

comment-rich, disaster-seeking news can encourage us to shut down and just listen to favoured sources. Attention span is an issue. A senior health journalist on a broadsheet newspaper who I know is resigned to most readers seeing at best the headline and first paragraph of his stories.

The massive reach into our society comes from the big broadcasters regulated by OFCOM (77% of people use the BBC at least sometimes) and the big newspapers. It is striking that much of the press remains owned by lookalike businessmen, very wealthy Eurosceptic right-wing white men who choose to live abroad or otherwise mitigate their liability to pay UK tax.

Two signs of the times are:

(1). Cheap online advertising has crippled strong local newspapers, who have always been key to holding councils, the local NHS and other local bodies to account. I live in Enfield, north London, where one of the two local newspapers has closed and the other barely survives. The only easy way to find out what is going on at the ward events run by councillors is a Facebook group called Enfield Voices, which relies on a citizen journalist, writing them up unpaid. Similarly, some of the most helpful media outlets to the nearby Winchmore Hill Quakers have been the N21online web community and its weekly email newsletter and some strong local blogs. Yet these worthy efforts are not produced by professional journalists with the resources, training and professional support a good newspaper would offer.

(2). You may have heard of the recent ‘hat’ controversy, about whether the TV *Newsnight* programme tried to make Jeremy Corbyn look sinister by selecting/manipulating the background and hat he was wearing. The journalist Owen Jones appeared on the programme and attacked their editorial slant, as he saw it.

That piece by Owen Jones was circulated on social media by the group Momentum and was seen by a million people, twice as many as saw the original story.

Truth Coming Out of Her Well

The 19th century picture by Jean-Léon Gérôme *Truth Coming Out of Her Well to Shame Mankind* depicts a naked woman, openly angry and ready with a whip. It is a wonderful illustration of how truth is sometimes chastising and difficult.

We need to dethrone a single worldview that is based solely on a white, male, establishment, heterosexual, imperialist mind-set. Seeing wider perspectives has brought honesty about power and, indeed, more scientific understanding. (For example, much of animal behaviour turns out to be different when women observe it.)

But humans suffer from many different biases. We seem to feel the need to seek out information sources and research that back our views. We are over-confident in our own abilities and we double-down when challenged. We can use social media to support and encourage us, eg allowing LGBT people from hostile backgrounds to access positive information that they are not weird or ill. But also, the new media landscape can be used to encourage Flat Earthers, and much more dangerous and violent people. Lincoln talked of the ‘better angels of our nature’ but we are seeing techniques used to sell cars and life insurance being turned to fuel the very worse spirits of our nature.

Little is more challenging than trying to see ‘that of God’ in Donald Trump. His willingness to lie about immediately obvious facts, like the size of his inaugural crowd, his utter

indifference to the truth, his vigorous pursuit of ignorance and prejudice, his craven chasing of his personal financial interests and his own vast childlike ego, his disrespect for the rule of law, all makes for a hurricane of dishonesty and bad faith. We will have to wait to see if the American Republic, however flawed, can survive a man who thought it was ‘un-American’ for Congressional Democrats not to applaud his speech. But in how Trump ‘won’ the election to become president, there is an important story.

The challenges of 2016

Let me show a benign example. If I want to promote my book to the right people I could use Facebook. Facebook has massive data about our interests - what we like and share, what groups and pages we like, how we answer quizzes, etc. At the simplest level I can tell Facebook I want to reach people 16+ years old, who like books and who live in the UK. A hairdresser might ask specifically for women living in Sheffield. This is called ‘targeted’ advertising.

A business can do more. It can cross-match data it has on its customers to Facebook data and find the Facebook profiles of its existing customers. Better still, it can use that rich data to see how to find new customers. For example, Joanna might find that people who like her book on solar-powered bikes often like bikes, or solar power. So she could market her book to people who like bikes or solar power. She might find vegetarians are slightly more interested than average but less so than solar power enthusiasts. So she could revise her strategy and deploy her advertising by results. And so on. Crucially, Facebook

promotes your ad to these people without giving the advertiser users' data.

Of course you could do something very similar using mailing lists rather than Facebook but it can be more expensive, and people share their data about likes and preferences much less willingly in response to an email than they do on Facebook.

And what if you look not to the 'better angels of our nature' but to the worst? There are numerous allegations that various people have broken US or UK data protection laws, including the allegation that in the recent referendum on whether the UK should leave the EU commercial companies run by Eurosceptic bosses broke UK law to share data with one of the Leave campaigns. Though fixing that should be more straightforward than what we do about data-driven marketing within the law.

The Trump campaign, working with people like Cambridge Analytica, cross-matched data from Facebook with data from their existing donors. They built a picture of angry conservative whites, for example by harvesting people who use vile racial epithets in their private messages, and/or who own guns. They thought this audience could be galvanised, so adverts were tried on them and those found to be the most effective had resources thrown behind them. Trump stirred up fear of immigrants, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and crime. Basic untruths found to push buttons included a non-existent war on Christmas. The campaign not only set out to promote Trump but also to vilify Clinton. There was a campaign to suppress voting among black people by making them disgusted with her.

There are those who doubt Cambridge Analytica are as effective as they say. Some of what they were caught saying on

TV appears to be illegal. But what I think is truly worrying is the way we can allow entirely false narratives to frame an election, pushed through social media that we may see as a harmless pastime or as a neutral player. There is a difference between clearly distinct election ads or broadcasts and purported 'news' shared by our friends. The problem is that we trust what our friends send us, even if it is carefully calculated lies.

Alongside this came the Russian operation, in which Russians posed as Americans and bots boosted content that favoured the pro-Russian candidate, Trump. But in fact, the entire social media operation was designed to throw doubt if Clinton won and to sow discord under any result. Russia promoted the candidacy of Green Jill Stein as viable, helped Bernie Saunders and amplified complaints about Clinton's win in the primary - and they hacked voting machines to promote a fraud narrative if they needed it. They even staged demonstrations, using social media to promote them, and tried to get left and right wing demonstrations close together in the hope that fights would break out.

On top of this, there was a scandalous and unintended outcome of Facebook process. Facebook likes you to post content that gets shared, so its pricing mechanism lowers the price of ads which lots of people share. Trump ads, appealing to base instincts, were shared much more and so Trump paid significantly less to reach his voters than Clinton did - on some accounts this was in the order of only a tenth as much per voter.

Facebook has created the marketers' dream - ads that people agree with are passed on to their friends in an instant.

Returning to Trump, Trump won the Electoral College not the popular vote. He won narrowly in three smallish states.

Suppressing the vote for his opponent and swaying a small proportion of the vote towards him was enough to swing the result. And there were other disturbing issues, including the conventional media obsession with Clinton's emails and laws which denied black and ethnic minorities their right to vote. (See <https://www.wired.com/story/how-trump-conquered-facebookwithout-russian-ads/>)

And Cambridge Analytica has been active since. In the Kenyan election in 2017 an anonymous video attacked the opposition candidate as an Islamic terrorist. There was violence and people died. Fuelling hatred brings a cost.

The novel and negative

An important research study was done recently in collaboration with Twitter, which made its data available to the researchers. (See <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/03/largest-study-ever-fake-news-mit-twitter/555104/> for more details). In short, the results validated the proverb, "*A false story can be round the world before the truth has its boots on.*"

MIT studied every piece of controversial news that propagated on the service from September 2006 to December 2016. True news appeared on high profile sites and had been checked as true by fact-checking sites. False news was judged as such by a variety of processes. The results showed:

- False stories reached 1500 views on Twitter six times quicker than true.
- All types of fake news spread faster, but particularly politics.

- Unexpectedly, web robots spread fake and true news equally.
- Fake news is wider (retweeted by bigger accounts) and deeper (retweeted and retweeted more).

Crucially, more novel and more negative content gets more sharing. They found that *“Fake tweets tended to elicit words associated with surprise and disgust, while accurate tweets summoned words associated with sadness and trust.”* We may be hardwired subconsciously towards more novel and negative news. I expect Facebook sharing will follow a similar ‘novel and negative’ rule, although this study did not address that.

The 2016 referendum was deeply depressing. A Remain campaign that failed to stir any passion, a Leave campaign that could promise six impossible things before breakfast. I believe that we are heading to being smaller, poorer, more stupid and less connected as a country. However we voted, what we can all agree however is that such a momentous decision needed to be made in a calm climate, looking at evidence and issues, and within a fair framework.

What do we do?

Modern devices and social media apps were designed to be addictive. Perhaps we need to see them in that light, as good servants but poor masters.

Here is the challenge. We wish to advocate for peace, for economic justice, for tackling challenges such as climate change. Do we enter an arms race, seeking to be more

sensational, aggressive, partisan and selective in our own communications? Do we seek to out-outrage Trump?

I already see in my own timeline a willingness to play the same game, like the rush even by Quakers to share anti-war memes that come from aggressors and human rights abusers in the conflict.

Where are the testimonies to truth, equality and peace in all that? I know social media encourages me to react immediately, not to bother to check, to respond with fire and fury to contrary opinions among my friends. It encourages me to curate who I listen to. It encourages the 'us and them' mind set.

In case you are not depressed enough, the future may be worse. It is going to get easier to forge pictures and moving pictures with sound. Films can already use the image of dead actors. There is a video on the internet today where President Obama has been manipulated to say something uncouth (by people wishing to demonstrate the danger). We are able to make a video where Hillary Clinton confesses to being a Satanist, or Donald Trump says something thoughtful, self-deprecating, kind and true.

The growth of Artificial Intelligence will not mean killer androids like the Terminator. It may mean automated Twitter programmes that are harder to spot and better coaching of Russian paid online provocateurs to sound more like Americans or Brits. It may mean better understanding of the data and therefore better advertising to appeal to our baser natures.

Quakerism is optimistic

Quaker virtues of waiting, reflecting and discerning are needed. We need to see how truth, integrity and our Quaker discipline matter in our daily lives. We should consider our Advices and Queries, a good many of which are relevant (see A&Q:17, 32, 33, 34, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41).

A small thing but I have decided, being brighter in the mornings, to do an hour's creative work before I turn to Twitter.

In our personal lives, have a diverse input of media. Choose, where necessary, to check sources, while accepting you cannot for everything. Engage calmly and share wisely. Raise each other up with a gentle hand.

We should understand good data protection rules, check our privacy settings and where necessary correct information held. Understand what use media organisations make of your data. Make informed decisions. Be on social media, or not, for a reason. I am sticking with Facebook and Twitter as a choice.

With peace, with saving the planet, with abolishing slavery we accept that personal witness and personal integrity are important but not enough. We are specifically told that our duty is to engage with the world. Nothing would less suit the times than a retreat into private, individual quietism. Freedom and democracy require an engagement in the public sphere. We need stronger electoral laws, strong data protection and a change to the Lobbying Act which currently gags charities but gives companies free rein.

Looking at the broadcasters and the big media companies, we may struggle to find immediate solutions. Attempts to introduce a new independent-ish press regulator have floundered. Levenson's proposed incentive to sign up to it, I believe, could

have emboldened the rich and powerful to silence newspapers through aggressive libel actions.

The rising up of a million, tiny, empowered voices has not been quite as we expected. For example, everyone can now publish their novel or put their exciting theory about the Muggletonians online at low cost. But how do you find the nuggets of gold in the desert of self-published sand?

Friends at the conference were quick to paint this as a problem of and about the young. In fact, the single age group most likely to share inaccurate information on Facebook are the over 60s. My daughter has done more on bias and sources at school than I ever did. She is a digital native and understands the perils. Remember the mockery of Media Studies; now we find we need to understand the media in even more depth. I do think we need a solid civics curriculum in schools, but it is a particular form of Quaker displacement to say ‘let the schools alone fix it’.

Quakers may not take easily to the picture of Truth, naked and angry, and flourishing a whip. I am all for subjectivity when it comes to the meaning of a spiritual experience, or the particular sense of a work of art. When it comes to the hard decisions we must make to ensure a world that can feed, clothe and heal all its people, we must be clearer. We must accept some stubbornness of facts under the spiritual discipline of listening, waiting and always being ready to be wrong.

Appendix

Some ideals for the media

- Clear, intelligent, well-researched

- It can be popular, and entertaining
- Ethical and principled
- Separates fact and opinion
- Doesn't pander
- Diverse in ownership and opinion
- Truth-focused/ open to correction
- Solutions-orientated
- Courageous
- Responsible - acts understanding consequences
- Understands that the public interest is different from public prurience – respects privacy
- Financially secure to investigate well and be robust against the powerful

NOTE from Stephen Cox

I am beginning to explore the idea of developing a set of unofficial 'queries' for this area along the lines of *Advices & Queries*. This uniquely Quaker approach is a good way to address complex issues of personal, corporate Quaker and public policy significance. These 'queries' would be shared more widely to provoke discussion and discernment on these very important issues.

If you would be interested in this project please drop me a line at Stephen.cox.pr@gmail.com.

Quaker Understandings of Truth: in religion, in a Quaker Meeting for Worship, in the media

The 2018 conference on Quaker understandings of truth explored the meaning and application of the Quaker testimony to truth and integrity in our present world. Four of the addresses given to the conference are published in this pamphlet.

Tony Philpott tackles the difficult question of how we determine or discern the truth. Truth itself is problematic because we use the term to refer to many different types of truth, and this is further complicated by “*a filter, or fog, between the truth and the person seeking it*” that results from the biasing effects of our socio-cultural environment and the inbuilt distortions of our human thinking and perception.

Alan York looks at the apparent clash between scientific and religious ‘truths’, arguing that it is inappropriate to use scientific language and logic when talking about spiritual experiences because the the physical world of science is essentially different from the spiritual world of religion/ mysticism. He goes on to consider what a language of spirituality might look like.

Hugh Rock uses the example of how the notion of universalism has been suppressed within the Christian Church, over the centuries, to show how truth in religion can be distorted and manipulated to fit into the preconceived ideas and purposes of powerful groups of people.

Stephen Cox, who has held senior posts in communications for a number of national organisations, writes about truth in the media and the use of mistruths to mislead and manipulate us. He says, “*If you are not worried about truth in politics and the media, you are not paying attention*” – and goes on to illustrate very persuasively why we need to be concerned and vigilant when we use the media.